

A Reader's Digest

REPRINT

"MIRACLE OF THE SPIRIT"

By Henry La Cossitt



THE READER'S DIGEST • PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK

Born to great wealth, Larimer Mellon felt he wasn't "going anywhere." Now he is—having dedicated his life to the people of Haiti

"MIRACLE OF THE SPIRIT"

By Henry La Cossitt

WILLIAM Larimer Mellon, Jr., might have been one of the men who control his family's multi-billion-dollar industrial empire of oil, aluminum and steel. He was to this privilege born. He is a son of the late co-founder of the Gulf Oil Corporation; he is a great-nephew of the late Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew W. Mellon, who developed the Aluminum Corporation of America. To almost anyone it would be wonderful to be a Mellon, with the future assured and easy. But Larimer Mellon, now 46, has willed otherwise.

On December 11, 1954, Larry, as everybody calls him, stood on a sunny hillside in Haiti and dedicated himself and his wife to the service of God and mankind. A youthful man with prematurely white hair and a handsome, kindly face, he is a doctor. He was making a speech at the cornerstone-laying of the new \$1,500,000 Albert Schweitzer Hospital at Deschappelles, about 90 miles northwest of Port-au-Prince. This 75-bed hospital, which

Larry paid for and of which he is in charge, will cost him about \$150,000 a year to operate. It is there to serve the hundreds of thousands of people in the valley of the Artibonite River.

These people have had only the most primitive medical facilities. They have been prey to malaria, yaws, tuberculosis, venereal disease. Malnutrition is shocking. (It is estimated that 10,000 Haitians died of starvation in 1955.) Sanitation is nonexistent.

To educate these people in cleanliness and diet, Larry, with his wife and four children, moved to Haiti in the summer of 1955, before the Albert Schweitzer Hospital opened its doors. For nine months while their home was being built they lived in a small house in malaria-ridden Saint Marc, besieged by rats and roaches and with few of the facilities most Americans enjoy.

To some, what Larry Mellon has done seems unbelievable. To one, at least, it is a miracle. This is Dr. Emory Ross, for 22 years a missionary in Africa and the friend of No-

"MIRACLE OF THE SPIRIT"

bel Prize-winner Dr. Schweitzer, whose example as a medical missionary inspired Larry to become one. Dr. Ross also made a speech at the dedication of the hospital that afternoon on the hillside. He told an audience that included Haitian President Paul E. Magloire and other dignitaries that what Larry has done is the kind of thing that profoundly changes the minds and souls of men. Dr. Ross called it "the miracle of the redirected spirit."

LARRY MELLON's boyhood was what you might expect. The family lived in a mansion on Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill. In summer there was the family lodge in Canada; in winter, the houseboat *Vagabondia* steaming through the Florida keys. There was an elegant 225-foot yacht for longer cruises. There were tutors, private schools and Princeton University—although Larry left Princeton at the end of his freshman year.

He was then 19. One of his friends says that if Larry had had to work his way through Princeton he might have finished. As it was, he felt ill at ease. He was looking for something, but didn't seem to be going anywhere.

Larry went to work in the Mellon bank and in Gulf Oil. He married, and soon was making something of a name for himself in business. Almost everyone felt that he was at last on his way to assuming his rightful place in the Mellon hierarchy. They were wrong. Six years

later his marriage failed because of basic incompatibility. He was 25 when he and his wife separated.

Larry went West and bought a ranch in Arizona, despite the misgivings of his father and mother. Nevertheless, his father later became his partner in the cattle business, and his mother came to love her visits to the nonconformist son.

Mrs. Mellon, who died in 1942, was what Larry calls "the great spiritual force in my life." Born in Scotland, the daughter of a seafaring family, she was deeply religious, gentle and modest. Larry recalls having asked her, when he was a child, what was the finest thing in all the world to be. Her reply was something he did not understand—then. She said: "A medical missionary."

When Larry decided to dedicate himself to the service of primitive people, his father was at first dubious. He reflected later, however, that his son had a way of succeeding at things he really wanted to do. At the time of his decision, Larry owned two huge ranches—which he sold for approximately double what he had put into them.

Larry's father might also have remembered that his son had taught himself Spanish, and had learned Portuguese while teaching English to a Brazilian schoolmate. Larry's linguistic ability got him a job with the State Department in World War II and this work might have led to a distinguished diplomatic career. But to Larry this had no

more appeal than a career in the Mellon offices.

In February 1946 Larry married Gwen Rawson, whom he had met earlier in Arizona, where she had come to get a divorce. Blue-eyed and pretty, Gwen took ranch life in stride. She could work with the stock, could even survey. She had a part in planning their handsome new home, complete with swimming pool. For Gwen, who appreciates the good things of this world more than Larry does, life was sweet indeed.

Then one day Larry said, "Gwen, I'd like to go to medical school. I want to become a doctor and then a medical missionary." He handed her a copy of *Life* magazine.

In it was a story about Albert Schweitzer entitled "The Greatest Man in the World." It told of his forest hospital at Lambaréné in French Equatorial Africa, and of how Dr. Schweitzer, although famed as philosopher, theologian, musicologist and organist, had, in keeping with the teachings of Christ, decided to become a doctor and dedicate his life to the people of Lambaréné. The example of a few men like himself, Dr. Schweitzer said, might inspire others to think more on matters spiritual and thus stop civilization's materialistic drive to ruin.

"The picture of an old gentleman musing on a log in the jungle," Larry says, "was a novel concept of greatness. It set me thinking."

It set Gwen thinking, too. At first

she was heartsick at the idea of giving up their pleasant life. But she realized that the ranches had ceased to be a challenge to Larry. Now that he had made them a success, they had become, in a way, as meaningless as the Mellon empire had been.

Gwen thought also of the nature of her husband. He is a reserved man, but he cannot hide his love for people and for everything that lives. His eyes fill when he tells you of Lambaréné, which he and Gwen visited in 1951, and where they worked among the lepers. Larry's concern for God's creatures is such that he cannot hunt or fish because he believes so strongly in Dr. Schweitzer's principle of "reverence for life."

Thinking of these things, Gwen realized that what Larry proposed was right for him—and what was right for him was right for her. With her blessing Larry wrote to Dr. Schweitzer.

He received a nine-page reply. Dr. Schweitzer was deeply moved. "May God help and bless you in the path you have chosen," he wrote. Then he gave some hard advice: "Do not hide from yourself the fact that the path will be difficult. One of the most serious difficulties is your age. It is harder to assimilate knowledge when one is older." But Dr. Schweitzer expressed confidence, and counseled Larry on what to study.

That winter Gwen and Larry went to the wilderness of eastern Peru to look for a site where the hospital they proposed to build

would do the most good. They found no place they thought suitable, but returned by way of New Orleans, where Larry talked to the faculty at Tulane University's medical school about studying there. To a man, the faculty discouraged him. He was too old, they said; he had no pre-medical training; he wouldn't be able to get along with his classmates because of the age differential.

What they could not know was that once Larry had made up his mind he was a formidable force. He entered Tulane in the summer of 1948. Seven years later he had received his M.D., served his internship and completed a one-year fellowship at the famous Ochsner clinic. Gwen, meanwhile, had kept pace with him by training as a medical technician.

At the end of his junior year in medical school Larry and Gwen went to Haiti to gather material for a thesis on tropical ulcer. As they drove over the country, they were not thinking of a site for the hospital. But when they saw the valley of the Artibonite they knew that was it. They acquired 100 acres.

Larry told President Magloire of Haiti about his plan, and the chief executive agreed to it in principle. Later, the agreement between the Haitian Government and the Grant Foundation (Gwen's maiden name is Grant), which Larry set up to finance the hospital, was approved by Haiti's congress.

Meanwhile, Larry had seen the man he reveres above all others, and

had gathered strength and courage from him. When Dr. Schweitzer was in New York in 1949, he and Larry spent an afternoon walking through the streets, while the great man told of Lambaréné and of his life and beliefs, and of what Larry might expect to encounter. "He was so absorbed," says Larry, "that I had to guide him. He did not seem to see traffic lights or traffic. He wanted me to know and to understand everything he had done."

Even before Larry had finished his internship, he and Gwen began recruiting the staff for their hospital. They are now satisfied that they have enough doctors to carry on the hospital's immediate work.

The building is a sprawling, one-story structure of poured concrete, built by Haitian laborers. Its equipment matches that of the most modern hospitals in the United States, and includes a dental clinic, a pathology laboratory, air-conditioned operating rooms. Eventually, Larry hopes to attach a veterinary clinic for the burros, goats and other animals precious to the bush folk. Following old customs, they probably will bring these along when they come for treatment.

Larry has also acquired a 100-acre farm which should make the hospital almost self-sufficient. Besides vegetables, corn and rice, the farm grows beef cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, turkeys and pigeons. There are also citrus fruits and bananas. Milk is imported in powdered form from the United States,

since there are no pasteurization facilities.

Thus the Mellons begin their great adventure. There have been discouragements. Sometimes people failed to carry out agreements and caused nagging delays. Now and then politics and jealousy harassed their progress.

But there have been touching and heart-warming experiences. Haitian volunteers built the road from the nearby highway to the hospital area, and a Haitian citizen paid the cost of oiling it. President Magloire and Minister of Health Elie Villard have been steadfast in their support when it might have been easy to be otherwise.

In the valley peasants bring the Mellons gifts of *langouste* (rock lobster), ducks, chickens, bananas and vegetables. They often appear out of the inky darkness at the edge of the lamplight and stand there, smiling and shy, offering these things. To many of them Larry and Gwen are sources of advice and comfort on everything from domestic troubles to education.

Larry wants the people of the valley to feel that the hospital is theirs. Because of this he will ask payment

for services, even if it is only one mango. "Anything will do," he says. "Just so they satisfy their pride in themselves." He wants the hospital to be "a place where American doctors can share their techniques with their Haitian colleagues." Someday, he hopes, this will make it possible for the Haitians to take over.

Should that happen, Larry and Gwen will move on. "There are other places where we might be useful," he says. One of these, he believes, may be at the headwaters of the Amazon River in Brazil or Peru. But that is for the future, if at all. Right now there is the Albert Schweitzer Hospital.

"Hospitals," Larry said in his speech dedicating the place, "require food and medicine administered with insight and love. To this task my wife and I humbly dedicate ourselves. May the spark of 'reverence for life' continue to burn until it has consumed us with real and deep concern for every living creature."

Larry Mellon is no longer looking for something. He has found it. "If we are able to alleviate suffering and make people feel more kindly toward one another," he says, "our work is well done."